

## PRESS RELEASE

Issued by the Montana Arts Council  
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### **Amy Ragsdale and Pat Williams tapped for the 2010 Governor's Arts Awards**

Governor Brian Schweitzer announced Missoula residents Amy Ragsdale and Pat Williams as two of six distinguished Montanans who will receive the 2010 Governor's Arts Award.

In addition to Ragsdale and Williams, the other honorees are: John Buck, Deborah Butterfield and Kelly Roberti from Bozeman; and Donna Forbes from Billings.

Of the honorees, Governor Brian Schweitzer says "These six Montanans have dedicated their lives to bringing the very best the arts has to offer to all the people in our state. They provide us with a legacy of talent that continues to enrich our lives and our communities."

Ragsdale and Williams, along with the other honorees, will be recognized at a ceremony in the state capitol's Old Supreme Court Chambers Friday, January 22, 2010, at 2:00 p.m. The ceremony, and the reception that follows in the Rotunda, are held for the recipients, their family and friends along with state legislators.

The Montana Arts Council and the Montana Ambassadors have joined forces again to produce the upcoming awards activities. The 2010 honorees will be recognized both in Helena in January and with "hometown celebrations" in their respective communities during the months of March through May.

### **DOWNLOAD JPEG PHOTO IMAGES AND PROFILES OF ALL THE HONOREES AT**

[http://www.art.mt.gov/about/about\\_govawards.asp](http://www.art.mt.gov/about/about_govawards.asp)

### **PROFILES OF MISSOULA HONOREES**

by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council

#### **Amy Ragsdale**

"I think that dance has the possibility of expressing the ineffable; of reaching a subconscious level that circumvents the rational, logical, word-oriented mind," says choreographer Amy Ragsdale.

The longtime University of Montana dance professor and founder of Headwaters Dance Company and its predecessor, The Montana Transport Company (Mo-Trans), moved to Montana in 1988 from her native New York City, where she had danced with several contemporary troupes. As a dancer and teacher, she has performed and taught throughout the United States and around the world.

She found abundant challenges, as well as inspiration, in moving to Montana, where many audiences had little exposure to contemporary dance. In response, she began to make works that were more theatrical and accessible, striving to make dances “that move the viewer emotionally or intellectually, as well as kinesthetically.”

As she explored choreography, she found herself inspired by the famous choreographer Bill T. Jones, with whom she had studied during graduate school at Wesleyan University in Connecticut (she earned her undergraduate degree from Harvard-Radcliffe College in Cambridge, CT) and danced with in New York City.

“It was his orientation toward making political work, and work that drew from his personal experience, that shifted my view of choreography from being purely a fun exercise in inventing movement toward being a way to express other kinds of content,” she writes. “I began to use choreography as a way to explore social and political issues that mattered to me, as well as to explore my own personal experience of the world and interpersonal relationships.”

Juliette Crump, dance professor emeritus at UM, describes her colleague as “a beautiful dancer whose many performances over the years have mesmerized and intrigued me for their clarity of expression and daring technique.”

After founding Headwaters Dance Company in 2004, Ragsdale embarked upon an ambitious project: “The Montana Suite,” a compilation of four dances, created by four nationally known choreographers and inspired by four Montana landscapes – the Boulder Batholith, the Hi-Line, the Rocky Mountain Front and the southeastern corner of the state.

Each choreographer spent a week to 10 days in their assigned region, touring, meeting locals, and reading fiction and non-fiction about the place. Then they created a 20-minute dance based on their impressions, in collaboration with a Montana-based composer.

The epic “movement anthology” was four years in the making and premieres Feb. 5-7 in Missoula. After touring Montana, the suite will be performed regionally and nationally. According to Crump, the project exemplifies how Ragsdale “is always looking for ways to connect her dance to Montana communities and to relevant issues for Montanans.”

Ragsdale has made her mark as a teacher too, having received the Outstanding Teacher Award from the School of Fine Arts, and the Outstanding Faculty Award from The University of Montana. She headed the dance program from 1988-2000.

“When I was a student majoring in dance, we used to joke that when we grew up we wanted to be Amy Ragsdale,” writes Lindsay Gilmour, now an assistant professor of theater arts at Ithaca College in New York.

“She was the perfect combination for us: an inspiring teacher, a great choreographer, a beautiful dancer, a director of a dance company ... For us, Amy embodied our hopes and dreams. She made it seem possible to pursue what it was we all loved.”

Her teaching has taken her to dance studios and schools around the world. She spent 1992 teaching modern dance at art schools in Bali, Java, Sumatra and Indonesia, and has also taught in South Korea, Spain and Martinique.

Ragsdale is also credited with developing a vigorous, adventuresome dance community in Missoula. “She has always been willing to reach out to other organizations and artists in her pursuit of high quality art in our world,” says Michele Antonioli, an associate professor of dance at UM. Antonioli praises both Ragsdale’s “stunning

collaborative pieces” and her site-specific works for broadening awareness and appreciation of modern dance in the state.

“Guest choreographers of national fame have come here and remarked about the amazing fact that great modern dance existed in the outback of western Montana,” says Antonioli.

“Amy Ragsdale is hugely responsible for the high quality dance, the strong community of support and the fertile ground that now exist for dance to continue to evolve and grow in Montana,” she adds.

### **Pat Williams**

Pat Williams, who served Montana as its U.S. Congressman for nine terms, from 1979-1997, is well known for his staunch advocacy to save the National Endowment for the Arts during the early 1990s, a full generation ago.

During his years in office, Williams was a member of the committees on Budget, Natural Resources, Education and Labor, and Agriculture. Within Education and Labor he chaired the committees on Post-secondary Education and Labor Management.

As a Deputy Whip of the U.S. House of Representatives, Williams had legislative process jurisdiction over bills affecting workplace legislation. During his tenure in office, he was also active on behalf of education, libraries, Native American tribal sovereignty, wilderness protection, environmental integrity for western states, and the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities.

When the National Endowment for the Arts came under attack for subsidizing what some legislators considered sexually explicit art, Williams led the fight to save the agency.

“As long as the federal government can support the arts without interfering with their content, government can indeed play a meaningful part in trying to encourage the arts,” Williams told *The New York Times*. “The genius of the NEA has been that the peer-review panels, made up of local folks, chose art and artists by using criteria based upon quality and excellence, never touching subject matter.”

“He was a tireless and fearless supporter of the arts,” reports John Frohnmayer, who served as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts during that tumultuous era. “He risked his political career in doing so.”

Frohnmayer recalls that Williams “called out the congressional critics of the Endowment for their duplicity and moral posturing.” He also threatened to prevent adjournment of Congress until the Endowment’s Reauthorization Bill was considered, and worked tirelessly to craft language that allowed the Endowment to continue to serve the country.”

“How could one ask for a better champion for the arts?” Frohnmayer asks.

A Butte native, Williams has referred to artists as society’s “canaries in the mines,” pointing to the artist’s ability to portend and depict our condition as a society.

Thanks to the legislator’s monumental efforts to save the NEA, Montana organizations still benefit from direct endowment grants or re-grant funds managed by the Montana Arts Council.

From 1998-2008, more than \$9 million in grant funds have directly benefited Montana. This money serves three out of every five Montana towns, and reaches into every single

county.

Missoula resident Sue Talbot, a Governor's Arts Award recipient and former chairman of the Montana Arts Council who has also been an indefatigable arts advocate, recalls visiting the legislator in Washington, DC.:

"After a few minutes talking about Montana news we would always switch to the subject of the arts in Montana. It was gratifying to know that Pat had a genuine desire to support the arts for everyone ... He believed that state or federal support should supplement individual and corporate donations for the small town art museum and the tour groups who present in rural areas, as well as the larger institutions in major Montana cities.

"His battles for the National Endowment for the Arts must have been personally taxing, but the reward was a success that has benefited not just Montana but our entire country."

Williams is an educator by profession and after leaving Congress he resumed his career at The University of Montana where he teaches courses in environmental studies, history and political science, and remains active in several organizations that benefit Montanans. His wife, Carol, is the Minority Leader of the Montana State Senate – the first woman to serve in that position.

David Nelson, the first executive director of the Montana Arts Council, remembers his early treks to the nation's capital, when he would meet with Sen. Mike Mansfield – also a strong proponent of federal funding for the arts who helped establish the NEA during the Kennedy administration – and his later meetings with Williams.

Nelson predicts, "Mansfield's role as a creator, Williams's as defender will be in the history books, with the tag line: 'It takes uncompromising integrity and courageous leadership to preserve the endowment – much of which was found in Montana.'"

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